

Introduction

Welcome to *The Juggler's Alphabet Book*, a concise introduction, in browsable A-to-Z format, to the venerable performing art that in more recent decades has been embraced as a creative pursuit, fitness activity, recreational sport, and fun mind-body challenge. For jugglers, this book is a refresher on the essence of the craft, and a reminder of the great artists along the rich continuum of its history. For non-jugglers, this book is a window into the juggler's world of pushing the limits of human capability, precision, and imagination. The aim of the book is to facilitate better understanding of juggling – and jugglers – for enthusiasts young and old.

The idea for this book came during an icy winter walk. The past several years, since I concluded my performance career, have been packed with research projects, deadlines, and public presentations. [Several years ago, after 35 years on stage, when I realized that aging acrobatic jugglers don't have a limitless future, I began a new career in the museum and history field. But the work still involves "jumping through hoops."] So on this particular walk – it was too icy for a run – I was daydreaming about a time when I could indulge in a short, fun project related to my former career that did not involve formatting 500 footnotes and working like a drudge.

On my walk I was free from stacks of books, away from the computer, and did not have my phone with me, or even a notebook. I was free to simply think. I had a small window of time between major projects, so I kicked around ideas that might (1) contribute to the juggling community, present and future; (2) appeal to the youngest juggling enthusiasts – and the oldest; (3) be fun for the reader; and (4) be manageable in size and scope.

I amused myself with the idea of an alphabet book that *looked* like it might be for pre-schoolers, but was really for adult readers, featuring mini-bio-sketches of notable jugglers from A-to-Z. But then I envisioned adults reading the short sketches to their kids, nieces, or nephews. This beget the idea to include key words relating to juggling, with short comprehensible definitions. I realized that in 26 two-page spreads, this alphabet book could serve as an introduction to the art, craft, and history of juggling for the non-juggler, youth or adult. Then I considered writing the book to also appeal to experienced juggling enthusiasts, its content reinforcing the pride we can claim for our place along an impressive historical continuum.

When I got home and thawed from the walk, outlining and planning began. Plenty of fine-tuning ensued, culminating in a format that features a main individual or subject on the left side of each two-page spread, and multiple individuals or topics on the right side. In your hands is the tangible result.

And now on to the tough choices of the book's A-to-Z content.

First of all, the premise is that of an alphabet book, not an encyclopedia. For some of the 26 letters in the alphabet, there were pile-ups of great jugglers. For example, for the letter "C" that featured Paul Cinquevalli, it was painful to bump the great Rudy Cardenas from the facing page in favor

of cascade, club, and concentration. And Ernest Montego was force-fit onto the “K” page as Ernest Kuhn because of the crowd on the “M” page. Due to the dearth of candidates for the letter “U” I stooped so low as to include a great juggler’s associate who later devolved into a circus booking agent.

Second, there was also a pile-up of worthy key-word topics that forced tough choices. For example, there was much relevant material on brain science left out, as were topics like creativity, fundamentals, originality, and even rest, “the basis of all activity.” Some topics, like concentration or discipline, to which whole books have been devoted, were compressed to two or three lines. Limited space forced a refreshing cogency.

Third, the book breaks no new ground in historical research, but rather draws upon the sometimes scant-and-sketchy biographical details from secondary and tertiary sources available to fellow historians of circus, vaudeville, and variety. Values internalized in my first career as a researcher, journalist, and editor – before showbusiness – still drive a skepticism of myth-making and runaway hagiography. For readers eager for more detail on the profiled artists, sources are cited on page 63.

Fourth, the book reflects the author’s bias as a retired acrobatic juggler and theatrical entertainer who regards juggling as a dynamic means to engage, communicate, and bond with live audiences. Therefore the book favors performing jugglers who proved themselves “on the boards” before audiences for many years. Some readers may miss the inclusion of their contemporary favorites. But to use a sports analogy, a superstar might be a dazzling “MVP” for a season or three, but they still have to build a body of work and wait awhile before induction to the Hall of Fame.

Fifth, in this book juggling is generally called a skill or *craft* rather than an art or sport. In my experience – in decades of immersion in the gym *and* performance on the stage – juggling is both a *craft* that can be learned, *and* a demanding *physical pursuit* that can be viewed as sport. By its nature juggling affords options for creativity, and there are some inspired jugglers who have elevated their *craft* to what some might label *art*. But in my view, the real “art” in all the craft-based performing arts is in the ephemeral live performance itself – the forging of a connection with an audience, the ability to emote – to share with an audience something enriching, moving, memorable, pleasurable, enlightening – and the ability to re-create that experience, night after night, show after show, with sincerity and purpose, even in less-than-optimal conditions. Now *that* is a performing *artist*.

For jugglers and non-jugglers. For jugglers, this is a book to share with your kids, parents, nieces and nephews, or grandma. If you don’t juggle but know a juggler, this book will help you understand your eccentric uncle, super-cool girlfriend, or hyperkinetic neighbor. When you finish this book, you might want to learn to juggle and join the fun, too. Happy reading.

– Reginald W. Bacon
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